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INFO RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
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UNCLAS MANILA 003935

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STATE FOR PM, S/CT, INR/EAP, INR/B, AND EAP/MTS
USPACOM ALSO FOR FPA HUSO
SECDEF/OSD/ISA/AP (LAWLESS/TOOLAN/BAILEY)
JOINT STAFF/J5 (WILKES/ROBINSON/CLEMMONS)

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TAGS: MOPS MCAP PREL PTER PINS PINR RP
SUBJECT: CHIEF OF STAFF ESPERON OUTLINES HIS VISION FOR THE
AFP

REF: MANILA 03095

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: General Esperon, the newly appointed Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), laid out his vision for the Philippine military in a major policy speech to the Manila Overseas Press Club on September 11. He called the entire AFP a "counterterrorism unit," and said the AFP would continue its ongoing operation to capture or kill the senior Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah leadership on the island of Jolo through the month of Ramadan. Esperon emphasized respect for the chain of command, and strongly endorsed Philippine Defense Reform, which he acknowledged was a long-term effort. Defense Secretary Cruz, Undersecretary for Defense Reform Carolina, and the senior leadership of the AFP and Philippine National Police attended the event in a clear sign of support. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) On September 11, General Hermogenes C. Esperon Jr., Chief of Staff of the AFP delivered major policy speech to the Manila Overseas Press Club, in which he outlined his vision for the AFP. Esperon covered a broad range of topics, including counterterrorism strategy, the importance of the chain of command, support for democratic processes, and Philippine Defense Reform.

¶13. (U) Esperon said the AFP will pursue a three pronged approach to defeating terrorism: (1) to deter; (2) to defend; and, (3) to destroy terrorist groups. At the heart of deterrence is building the capacity of government forces engaged in the fight against terrorists. Esperon pointed to the importance of bilateral and multilateral initiatives and to strengthening linkages among various domestic agencies, including the AFP, the Philippine National Police, National Bureau of Investigation, and other investigative bodies. Esperon advocated stationing troops in and around vital infrastructure, specifically citing the Malampaya Natural Gas facility on Palawan and the Subic-Clark Expressway. Esperon said to destroy terrorist groups, the Philippines must "choke off critical terrorist nodes, such as access to sanctuaries, funds and equipment." He stated that this strategy had worked against Jemaah Islamiyah, and that the AFP would sustain and intensify its ongoing campaign against the Abu Sayyaf Group in southern Mindanao, noting in the subsequent question and answer session that the AFP would continue its ongoing operation to capture or kill senior Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah leaders on the island of Jolo through the Muslim month of Ramadan. Esperon cautioned against complacency and assured his audience that "your AFP is firmly resolved to pursue terrorists." He urged them to support the Anti-Terrorism bill, which is pending in the Philippine

Senate.

14. (U) Esperon strongly endorsed Philippine Defense Reform (PDR), while acknowledging that reforms will not happen overnight. He noted that because of PDR "by 2010, the AFP will be stronger than (it is) today."

15. (U) When asked about military adventurism and past military involvement in coup attempts, Esperon firmly rejected any effort to change government through violence. He said he supported prosecution of Brigadier General Danilo Lim, the former Scout Ranger commander who was implicated in the February 2006 alleged coup plot.

16. (U) The following quotes provide some flavor for Esperon's thinking::

- "The entire AFP is a CT (counterterrorism) unit."
- "The best antidote to terrorism is development."
- "Any self-respecting military man respects the chain of command."
- "We respect the CPP's (Communist Party of the Philippines) right to free speech; As long as they are not involved in (military) engagements, we will give them the benefit of the doubt."

17. (U) COMMENT: The Overseas Press Club address was a major event for Esperon, who has previously been reluctant to engage the press. His remarks demonstrated that he has a clear sense of where he wants to take the AFP. Coupling his speech to a domestic audience, Esperon consciously used the

words "your AFP" on numerous occasions to demonstrate the military's links to the Philippine people. Secretary of Defense Avelino Cruz, Undersecretary of Defense Reform Ernesto Carolina, and the senior leadership of the AFP and Philippine National Police attended the event in a clear sign of support. At one point Secretary Cruz was invited to say a few words, but he declined, appearing content to leave the limelight to the Chief of Staff. END COMMENT.

KENNEY